

Obituary

ROBERT LEES (1903-80)

Robert Lees died in his sleep on 21 October 1980 after a long and fruitful life. His medical education was at Edinburgh University from 1920 to 1925 and after appointments as house physician at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary he underwent further training at St Peter's and St Paul's Hospitals in London. At the young age of 27 he was appointed assistant physician to the department of venereal diseases in Edinburgh, where, with his uncle, David Lees, they jointly produced a textbook which was a standard work at the time.

The 1939-45 war brought further distinction, when he was consultant venereologist to the allied forces in the Middle East; he rose to the rank of brigadier and was mentioned in despatches. After returning to Britain he was appointed to teaching clinics at first in Leeds then Manchester, finally returning to his beloved Edinburgh to take charge of his old department until his retirement in 1968.

More senior members of the Medical Society for the Study of Venereal Diseases will recall with pleasure his beautiful house and garden, a National Trust property at Inveresh, where a reception was held during the Edinburgh meeting in 1962. This setting enabled him to enjoy to the full his hobbies of gardening, music (he was host at numerous musical evenings), and salmon fishing.

After "retirement" he continued his working life with vigour. For a short time in Libya he took charge of the leprosy services—which came to an abrupt halt for political reasons—on his return, he occupied himself with locum sessions in Manchester, Norwich, and latterly the London area, the most recent being only last year. Some will remember him best from this period. Those concerned with the clinics at St Mary's and Windsor Hospitals have had many occasions to be very grateful to him. He always unhesitatingly and cheerfully accepted requests for assistance, at little or no notice, in a senior or junior capacity as required and without question.

He was a generous, lovable, family man with a strong sense of humour and will be greatly missed. Deepest sympathies are extended to his widow, son, and two daughters, one of whom was a doctor, with whom he lived during the past two years.—RRW



Those who knew and worked with Robert Lees will remember him affectionately for his wide experience of life and of his specialty and especially for his capacity to dispel gloom.

After 43 years of medical practice he retired in 1968 from his post as head of the university department of venereal diseases at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, where he had spent a significant part of his medical career. After graduating in 1925 he began his career in Edinburgh as house physician to Professor Bramwell and later joined the staff of his uncle, David Lees, who in 1919 had been appointed to develop the new venereal diseases department at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary and in 1920, as lecturer, to be responsible for the course of obligatory instruction in the subject as part of the medical curriculum recently approved by the Senatus. Robert Lees also, as tutor in general medicine, worked with Dr J D Comrie, the historian of Scottish medicine. He was later initiated into genitourinary surgery as a resident in St Paul's Hospital, London; although he had developed an interest in neurology, this was cut short when his uncle died tragically after an operation in 1933. He then became chief assistant to Dr R C L Batchelor in the department of venereal diseases at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary in 1934.

Elected in 1929 as a member of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and as a fellow in 1933 his path had been established in venereology when he proceeded to MD in 1938. In his thesis entitled "The Treatment of General Paralysis of the Insane", Robert Lees gave the results on patients treated at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary between the years 1925-38.

The technique of malaria treatment and the chemotherapy of the time involved infection with *Plasmodium vivax* and, after a month of convalescence, treatment with tryparsamide and bismuth. The transformation of venereological practice by the use of antibiotics made the times of Robert Lees and his generation an epoch in medicine because of this miracle of nature and human ingenuity.

At the outbreak of war in 1939 Dr Lees first went to the Royal Herbert Hospital, Woolwich, and later joined GHQ Cairo, where he formed part of a nucleus of specialists. From Cairo the war took him to Algiers and later to Italy, where, as brigadier, he helped to quell the epidemic of gonorrhoea in the troops in Naples; eventually in 1944 he reached the Po Valley. An interest in history must have made him ponder on the outbreak of syphilis which occurred in 1494 during the siege of Naples when he himself was confronted with an epidemic in a city with troops of many races. He told me of the epidemic of typhus which menaced the forces and of the miraculous effect of penicillin in controlling the outbreak of gonorrhoea.

After demobilisation in 1945 Dr Lees returned briefly to Edinburgh before taking up an appointment in Leeds as consultant venereologist and adviser to the Regional Hospital Board. In 1947 and in 1949, as a Nuffield visitor, he spent some months in Nigeria, Ghana, the Gambia, and Sierra Leone. In 1948 he was in Manchester reorganising the venereal disease services for five million inhabitants. This occupied him until 1952, when Dr Batchelor retired and once more Dr Lees came to Edinburgh, now as head of the university department of venereal diseases and consultant in administrative charge.

After his retirement from Edinburgh, Dr Lees travelled widely; he spent time in Tripoli in the constant battle against infection and burns endured by patients with leprosy. He wrote of treating warts with liquid nitrogen and of the curiosity which arose over "the strange drink" which the foreign doctor carried around. As well as this desert interlude in Libya he worked in clinics at St Mary's Hospital, London, and at Stevenage after his retirement. A letter from him a few weeks before his death told of his contentment with life, his love of his family, and of his delight with his grandchildren.

Our sympathy is extended to his wife and family who will be sustained by their faith and memories of his full and useful life.—DHHR